

### Appleby Archaeology Group    March Meeting

At the last meeting of their winter session members of the Appleby Archaeology group were transported to the Hebridean Islands of Colonsay and Oransay. The speaker, Janet Niepokojezycka, who was closely involved with the archaeology group Search, has visited the islands many times and her enchantment with them was evident. The islands lie at the entrance to the Firth of Lorn and are linked by a narrow causeway which becomes dry at low water. Mull is to the north, Islay to the south and Jura to the east but on the west they are exposed to the full force of the Atlantic gales.

Using beautiful slides and a map Janet Niepokojezycka, took the group on a circular tour of the islands pointing out their many attractions including beautiful deserted beaches and many varieties of wild flowers and sea birds. The islands have a strong oral tradition and tales and legends were referred to during our tour. As we journeyed our attention was drawn to the archaeological and historical sites which span 9000 years from the Mesolithic period to the present day.

In the Mesolithic period the islands were part of mainland Scotland and hunter gatherers visited the area to use the resources of the sea as evidenced by "shell mounds" that is to say layers of rubbish, mainly of limpet shells. In some of the mounds stone and bone tools have been found. Recent excavations have found traces of hearths and of a Mesolithic round house. No settlements from the Neolithic period (c.4000-2000BC) have been recorded but hut circles and field systems have been identified indicating Bronze Age (c.2500-600BC) activity. Perhaps more dramatic are the standing stones. The two most impressive are known as "Fingal's Limpet Hammers" which stand on a raised beach on the west coast.

The islands have many Iron Age (c.600BC-400AD) fortifications. These fall into two categories, forts and duns. The forts are the larger and enclose greater areas of land but both tend to be built on high ground or on promontories. One small dun with a name meaning "dun of the biting wind", is now the second tee of the golf course. These fortifications may have been reused by the Vikings who were present on the islands in the 9th-10th centuries and who left evidence of their two main forms of graves, long cists and enclosures. The enclosure of upright stones at one site was covered by a boat. Iron age pottery and many Scandinavian artefacts have been found.

There is evidence supporting the early presence of Christianity on the islands. A 7th century cross

with a large human face carved on the top arm can now be seen in the gardens of Colonsay House and across the islands the remains of dry stone chapels have been found. Legend says that St Columba visited Oransay and founded a priory. There are certainly ruins of a priory on the island but it was founded by the Augustinians in the 14th century and dedicated to St Columba. The building is of sandstone and schist with the monastic range to the north of the church. The walled garden of the present day farm may have been the site of the priory garden. A number of monumental sculptures can be seen which include carved grave slabs and the Oransay Cross which is over 3 metres high, intricately carved and dated to the 15th century. In those days the islands lay within the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles. Later the islands were leased to the Macfies and subsequently to the McNeills until 1904 when the line died out and the islands were bought by Lord Strathcona. A number of monuments record the clan history as do tales of murder and intrigue.

On the journey round the islands more recent buildings were pointed out. Colonsay House built in 1722 is the largest domestic building on the Islands. Ruined townships of the 18th and 19th centuries and remains of sheilings are seen across the islands. The cottages had areas for storage, animals and domestic use but no chimneys. Some are examples of the traditional "Black House". At the ruined fishing village Raisig Buidhe some had had chimneyed fireplaces added. A feature of the larger 19th century farmsteads is the octagonal horse gang or engine house attached to the barn where the animals provided the energy for activities such as threshing and milling. Today the islands are geared to the holiday maker and offer visitors a variety of accommodation and activities.

Janet Niepokojezycka concluded her talk with a series of slides showing the standing stones as she read poems she had written about the mystery of the stones and the beauty of Islands.

PS I found further interesting details of the archaeology of the islands on [www.colonsay.org.uk/history](http://www.colonsay.org.uk/history).

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